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John Kerry's Faith—A Closer Look

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Kerry has only recently incorporated such religious language in his speeches, and his identity as a professing Roman Catholic has as yet made little impact on the presidential race. This stands in stark relief to the controversy over the candidacy of John F. Kennedy, who served as the first and only Catholic candidate elected to the nation's highest office.

This week's issue of TIME magazine points to a potential problem with Kerry's Catholicism. This time, the criticism is not coming from non-Catholics opposed to a Catholic candidate, but from Catholic authorities increasingly frustrated with Catholic politicians who violate the church's moral teaching in their political lives.

As TIME reports, "Kerry's positions on some hot-button issues aren't sitting well with members of the church elite." The magazine cites a Vatican official who said, "People in Rome are becoming more and more aware that there's a problem with John Kerry, and a potential scandal with his apparent profession of his Catholic faith and some of his stances, particularly abortion."

Kerry has been a stalwart defender of abortion rights, and also holds to a thorough pro-homosexual set of policy positions. Though he claims to oppose same-sex marriage, he voted against the federal Defense of Marriage Act [DOMA] and opposes President Bush's call for a constitutional amendment establishing marriage as a union of a man and a woman. He has taken confusing and contradictory positions in response to the same-sex marriage controversy in Massachusetts, and supports civil unions for homosexual couples.

Does Kerry see a problem with his selective Catholicism? "I don't think it complicates things at all," he told TIME in an interview aboard his campaign plane. Kerry seems to think that the best defense is a good offense.

Kerry went on to explain his self-understanding as a Catholic politician by drawing a parallel with John F. Kennedy. "We have a separation of church and state in this country. As John Kennedy said very clearly, I will be a president who happens to be Catholic, not a Catholic president."

Kennedy made that statement in 1960 as he addressed the Greater Houston Ministerial Association, a group of Protestant clergy who were suspicious of Kennedy's Catholicism. Kennedy, then running as the Democratic nominee for President, told the pastors, "I believe in an America where the separation of church and state is absolute—where no Catholic prelate would tell the President (should he be Catholic) how to act, and no Protestant minister would tell his parishioners for whom to vote—where no church or church school is granted any public funds or political preference—and

where no man is denied public office merely because his religion differs from the President who might appoint him or the people who might elect him.”

Nevertheless, in order to assert this point, Kennedy had to redefine religion in terms of a totally privatized faith. “I believe in a President whose religious views are his own private affair,” the candidate said, “neither imposed by him upon the nation or imposed by the nation upon him as a condition to holding that office.”

The background to Kennedy’s statement included the Catholic Church’s teachings on issues like birth control, divorce, and sexual morality. Kennedy insisted, “I am not the Catholic candidate for President. I am the Democratic Party’s candidate for President who happens also to be a Catholic. I do not speak for my church on public matters—and the church does not speak for me.”

“Whatever issue may come before me as President—on birth control, divorce, censorship, gambling, or any other subject—I will make my decision in accordance with these views, in accordance with what my conscience tells me to be the national interest, and without regard to outside religious pressures or dictates,” Kennedy pledged. “And no power or threat of punishment could cause me to decide otherwise.”

Kennedy ended his speech with a promise to resign his office if a conflict of conscience should ever arise. “But if the time should ever come—and I do not concede any conflict to be even remotely possible—when my office would require me to either violate my conscience or violate the national interest, then I would resign the office; and I hope any conscientious public servant would do the same.”

That last statement draws more focused attention to the challenge now faced by John Kerry. As TIME reflects, Kennedy’s statement was made “before Roe v. Wade, bioethics, school vouchers, gay rights and a host of other social issues became the ideological fault lines that divide the two political parties and also divide some Catholics from their church.”

John F. Kennedy did not face pointed and inescapable questions about abortion, same-sex marriage, embryo research, and the like. John F. Kerry must face those issues squarely, and he comes to this presidential campaign with a record of votes in the Senate dealing with the same issues. There can be no question that John Kerry stands in direct violation of the clear teachings of his church on any number of controversial issues.

In the modern age, the Catholic Church has faced the development of “cafeteria Catholics” who pick and choose the Church teaching they will accept, and simply disregard and disobey the rest. In political life, this has produced candidates and politicians who appeal to Catholic voters as fellow Catholics, but identify with the left wing of the Democratic Party once elected, taking positions that are in stark opposition to the Church’s teaching on the sanctity of human life and the integrity of marriage. There are “cafeteria Christians” of many stripes, and the heated debates of the Culture Wars are drawing increased attention to this problem.

The Vatican is increasingly frustrated with politicians who run for office as Catholics, only to violate Catholic moral teaching at every turn. Will rank-and-file Catholics see John Kerry as a renegade? The question is certain to be magnified as the campaign heats up. This is going to be a long, hot summer.

